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Limitations and Prospects of African Languages in Ethics Scholarship in African Studies

Abstract

What are the limitations and prospects of indigenous languages in African ethics scholarship? This paper addresses this question by arguing the imperativeness of a reflexive interrogation of the use of indigenous languages in the construction and re-interpretation of moral values in ethics scholarship in African Studies. This paper provides some theoretical reflections on the weaknesses and strengths of a reconfigured linguistic nuances in the articulation of the overlapping dominant moral ideals embedded in traditional and changing moralities in African culture. This paper defends a pluriverse conception of African ethics studies reconfiguration that marks a considerable shift from both the ‘exterior orientation’ that prizes exogenous knowledge production on moralities in Africa with international dissemination and preservation mechanisms, as well as the ‘interior orientation’ in African Studies that is driven by the postcolonial quest of defending African identity in African ethics scholarship by largely writing back to audience and moral agents outside of Africa. In reconfiguring ethics scholarship in the new African Studies, this paper exposes some fundamental limitations of the new emphasis on African languages in ethics scholarship while concluding with some prospects for future African Studies.

Keywords: African ethics; indigenous language; exterior orientation; interior orientation; African studies

Introduction

The fundamental question engaged in this paper concerns how ethics scholarship in African studies can be reconfigured through indigenous African languages. One of the topical issues in African Studies today has to do with the “multiple variables pertaining to the length and nature of the colonial relationship, the extent of cultural subjugation and erasure and the retention and/or loss of indigenous languages and institutions” (Osha 2020). The question of loss and retention of indigenous languages surfaces in the context of scholarship in African ethics. While the ethics of a society is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character, the question of the role of language in the conception of what passes muster as moral is of interest to this paper.

The paper is divided into four parts. Following the introduction, a conceptual analysis of the idea of African ethics is provided. The rivalry orientations on the place of indigenous languages in ethics scholarship are presented and evaluated in the second section. In the third section, I defend a pluriversalist conception of African ethics. The concluding part provides some thoughts on areas for future studies.

The Idea of African Ethics

A clarification of the word ‘African’ in the phrase ‘African ethics’ as well as ‘ethics’ is important to enhance subsequent understanding of the idea of African ethics. Though the word

'African' is an ambiguous term usually defined in terms of anything pertaining to or originating from Africa, be it animate or inanimate beings, culture, and language, in the context of 'African ethics' it is more of a qualification for particular characterization(s) of thoughts in ethics dominant in (and indigenous to) Africa. Ethics, as used here, is the systematic reflection on norms and terms of conduct not only for the sake of moral knowledge but for the "harmonization of (conflicting) interests in human society" (Wiredu, 2005: 45). This sense of 'ethics' is subtly different from 'ethic' that "consists of a code or codes of behavior devised for the well ordering of specific human interactions or activities" (Wiredu, 2005: 45). Considering the multiplicity of African cultures and behavioural codes in different African societies/regions, "there exists no single unified 'African ethic'" (Horsthemke, 2015: 1).

However, given the diverse philosophical reflections on the mores, customs, and the ethic of behaviour in many parts of Africa, there are emerging perspectives in African ethical tradition. Nonetheless, there are "certain core ideas that appear with astonishing regularity across African (especially sub-Saharan) societies and cultures" (Horsthemke, 2015: 1), which roughly defines the principles and nature of African ethics. It is against this backdrop that Thaddeus Metz provides an instructive conception of African ethics as collections of "works done by contemporary moral theorists that is significantly informed by features salient amongst the beliefs and practices of the indigenous black peoples below the Sahara desert" (Metz, 2017: 62).

African ethics, writes Kwame Gyekye (2011), "is used to refer both to the moral beliefs and presuppositions of the *sub-Saharan African people* and the philosophical clarification and interpretation of those beliefs and presupposition." It is an aspect of African philosophy concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour with the African mindset (Omoregbe 1993). It is scientific in the sense that it thoroughly evaluates, examines and analyses these moral norms, principles and human behaviour and the reasons why such principles and conduct are considered right or wrong. For Godwin Azenabor (2007), African ethics is simply the branch of African philosophy that deals with the critical reflection on the manner and nature of life, conduct, behaviour and character of the 'African'.

In consonance with Gyekye, Motsamai Molefe (2016) provides two complementary definitions of African ethics. Firstly, it expresses the commonly shared moral beliefs and presuppositions by people below the Sahara. Secondly, it refers to the intellectual reflections and deliberations on these moral intuitions. This definition however does not presuppose that there is absolute agreement about African moral thought, but means that "there are sufficient commonalities among the peoples below the Sahara that warrant and justify the use of this phrase to capture a body of work attempting to critically reflect on these (commonly) held moral beliefs" (Molefe 2016: 3).

Following the above articulation of African ethics, the question is the role of African indigenous languages in in-seminating ideas and communicating scholarship in African ethics? The next section seeks to address this important concern.

Indigenous Languages and African Ethics: Reflections on the Limitations

Ethics scholarship in contemporary African studies is predominantly done in foreign languages with little or no regard for the epistemic import of indigenous African languages. Some scholars think that in producing knowledge on moralities in Africa, the language of reflection and

expression does not count so much in so far as the epistemic value of international dissemination, contributions, and preservation mechanisms are taken into cognizance. I identify this thinking as the 'exterior orientation' in African ethics. The Africanness of ethics scholarship according to the exterior orientation is not a function of authorial point of origin nor a matter of the language of expression. Construing Ethics in African Studies as an open intellectual inquiry requiring more fundamentally expertise in systematic analysis of moral language and moral judgments, the defenders of exterior orientation would argue that understanding indigenous languages is secondary to a thorough ethics scholarship. Indeed, the Africanist contributions to ethics in African studies would be better appreciated when grounding in indigenous African languages is not a desideratum.

For one, "there is nothing untoward to having European languages as the official languages in contemporary African society because such languages are already in place and they offer a gateway to forms of knowledge and expression that are international in scope" (Keita, 1999: 28). For the other, "thoughts are flexible and non-completely dependent and streamlined by linguistic terminology embedded in a given culture; thus, differences in language do not necessarily mean differences in thought pattern" (Fayemi, 2013: 3) on moralities. Consequently, regardless of geo-spatial locations, any scholar whether versed in African culture and language or not, can intelligently engage and research themes and issues in African ethics just in so far as she possesses the methodological expertise in ethics research. A foremost example of this orientation is Thaddeus Metz, who is one of the leading scholars in African ethics. While many of his works are theoretical and applied articulations of *ubuntu* relational moral values to contemporary realities, Metz employs strictly the use of English language as a mode of reflection and expression on African moralities.

When one considers the fact that a very large percentage of works in African ethics today is conducted in foreign languages with the benefit of audience beyond the linguistic confines of Africa being able to contribute to the discourse, one might argue that the exterior position is plausible. However, against such view is the 'interior orientation' that contends against the cogency of the above position. The 'interior orientation' in African Studies broadly, and in African ethics, think that in avoiding conceptual distortions arising from the use of non-indigenous languages, and the false representations of African moralities in contemporary scholarship, African indigenous languages is a core desideratum. Many scholars in this line of thought are often driven by the postcolonial quest of defending African identity in African ethics scholarship. Exploring African indigenous languages is a concomitant to the internationalisation of African moralities through writing back to both moral agents in Africa and audience in Africa Diaspora. With strong aversion for foreign languages because of the power relation and epistemic injustice involved, scholars of the interior leaning in African ethics argue for the adoption of indigenous languages in doing ethics scholarship in African studies. Kwame Gyekye (2011) is a noble example of a scholar who heavily relied on indigenous African "moral language as his point of departure" in African ethical analysis. While emphasizing "the centrality of the notions of character and moral personhood, which are inspired by the African moral language," Gyekye (2011) believes that "the language of morality [in African culture] gives insight into the moral thinking or ideas of the society."

For Gyekye (1995), "language, as a vehicle of concepts, not only embodies a philosophical point of view, but also influences philosophical thought... Language does not merely suggest, but may also embody philosophical perspectives." Gyekye holds that every language implies

or suggests a vision of the world. Gyekye, using the Akan language and its linguistic repertoire, analyses some moral concepts in Akan thought. Essentially for him, the adoption of indigenous language in the discovery and construction of African moralities is core to developing ethics tradition in African studies. To the extent that indigenous languages in use in each intellectual tradition may strongly influence the structure of ethical thinking and normative vocabularies, the question is what are the limitations of the interior orientation in ethics scholarship in African studies?

A seeming fundamental limitation of the interior orientation is epistemic relativism. If knowledge production on indigenous African moralities are influenced by the structures and characteristics of native languages, relativism of moral ideals might ensue. Moral ideals, judgments and analyses that are indigenous language-oriented will also depend on the native language for their plausibility or validity. Should the interior view be accepted that ethical theses are “strongly influenced by the characteristics of the languages in which they are formulated, a meaningful and profound assessment of the theses can best be achieved through an adequate understanding of the structures and characteristics of the language in question” (Fayemi, 2013: 5). The potential limitation to cross-cultural scholarship that will result from not being either an indigenous speaker of the language of moral analysis or a foreigner with linguistic proficiency in the language of discourse is overwhelming. Another challenge confronting the cogency of the interior orientation is the nature of changing moralities in African culture with the uncertainties surrounding what constitute overlapping dominant moral ideals amidst the different multi-cultures in Africa. In this regard, the question is how to balance the fluid and multiple moralities with diverse indigenous languages in Africa without occasioning an irreversible loss of cohesive cultural identity affirmation.

To illustrate the above point, consider Kwame Gyekye’s case for the use of indigenous languages in meditations and writings in African ethical studies. Gyekye did not write in indigenous Akan language even when his theoretical explorations are anchored on the conceptual scheme and moral vocabularies of the Akans; he wrote in English language. The tragedy of this situation is pointed out by Ngugi wa Thiong’o who noted that “any attempt at cultural decolonization carried out within the ambit of the European languages is already a capitulation to a European cultural standard crudely disguised as universalization” (wa Thiong’o 1993:xvii). wa Thiong’o’s (1986:16) opposition to colonial language is ideologically inclined to “control how the Africans manage their daily lives, their mental universe, and their perception of themselves and their relationship to the world.” Now that some major European languages are widespread enjoying certain privileges including translation reliability and seeming universal acceptance, the question is how can the limitations and strengths of the exterior and interior orientations be plausibly explored in reconfiguring African ethics?

In the next section, I seek to answer this question while gesturing towards a pluriverse conception of and approach to African ethics.

Towards Reconfiguring African Ethics: A Pluriversalist Imperative

I defend in this section a reconfiguration of African ethics studies through a pluriversal conception of African ethics. Such a conception marks a considerable shift from both the exterior and interior orientations on the language question in African studies to an overlapping pluriversalist thinking. Generally, pluriversalism expresses the idea of multiple worlds of knowledge with interconnected vision but with “different histories, different worldviews,

different ontologies and epistemologies that define the contours of lived realities and future imaginations” (Ehrnstrom-Fuentes, 2016, p. 1) of a sustainable transformative society. In the context of African ethics, a pluriversalist conception of African ethics sees morality from the lens of multiplicity, relationality, and heuristic reflexivity.

While the interior orientation claims that moral knowledge production and dissemination on Africa is ideally most epistemic and pragmatically beneficial when done in Africa by African-centered scholars through the lens of African indigenous languages, the exterior orientation in African ethics prizes exogenous knowledge production on moralities in Africa with international dissemination and preservation mechanisms regardless of the linguistic vector of moral thought. Admittedly, the interiorist call is “a set of new ambitions for research by Africans in Africa” (Hountondji, 2009, p. 1) for responsible and responsive knowledge production with Africa as the primary spatial foci, whether in terms of dissemination, audience and relevance. Except for the limited scope of its moral agent ambience and relevance, the stance of the interior orientation is not wholly vicious.

The interiorists are commendably seeking a rehabilitation of how African ethical studies is done by advocating the telling of African narratives from ‘inside out’, relying on African epistemic and ontological principles and finding as intellectually befitting the use of ‘African ethics’ as opposed to pejorative category of ‘African ethic’. However, a major false assumption implicit in the interior orientation is that every endogenously produced and disseminated moral knowledge would be socially transformative, epistemically valid, and pragmatically beneficial to the African world. “No symmetrical relations exist between agents and place of knowledge production; much as endogenously produced knowledge does not guarantee an efficient application for the common existential good of African societies” (Fayemi 2019).

To the extent that the interiority position is roughly flawed, the exteriority stance is nonetheless questionable too. The exterior intellectual tradition, which studies and understands Africa not necessarily from within Africa and by African intellectuals through African languages; it holds that originality and ownership of African studies scholarship for Africa’s transformation can be cogently conducted by Africanists and institutions outside Africa through the embrace of languages with optimal international audience. For the exteriorists, the language question is secondary to the Africanists researching about Africa from outside Africa, archiving produced moral knowledge about Africa outside the continent and prioritising the dissemination of ethical ideals in Africa in international academic outlets and repositories rather than within African societies where such knowledge is generated. As laudable as this orientation is in her vision, its fundamental shortcoming is that “it is not only inimical to the construction of an Africa-centred [ethical] scholarship and endogenous [moral] knowledge systems but also detrimental to the developmental needs of the continent.” This orientation through the adoption of foreign language as vector of investigation seems to further the epistemic marginalisation of the cognitive, linguistic, and conceptual ethical resources developed in ancient Africa.

In reconfiguring ethics scholarship in the new African Studies, this paper argues that the nature, varieties, and flexibilities of moralities in African culture can be better discovered, constructed, and interpreted in a pluriverse space where indigenous languages are promoted without an attenuation of conceptually decolonized usage of foreign languages and conceptual schemes. In reconfiguring African studies, therefore, beyond language of engagement concern, a

methodic consideration is essential. Theoretical, ethnographic, heuristic, analytic, casuistry, and hermeneutic approaches must be taken seriously in re-addressing some Eurocentric categorization of values and moralities in the multiple African contexts. In this wise, infusing the everyday indigenous languages of moralities in different African cultures is promising in the anthropology, criticality, and metatheory of ethics in African Studies. Hermeneutics of African moral languages in multiple contexts and African linguistic spaces would change the current narratives on the seeming limited scope of African ethics by promoting, *mutatis mutandis* (allowing for necessary variations, multiplicity, and flexibility), a flourishing culture of ethics in African Studies. The salient ideas in such ethics would be beneficial for everyday struggles in global Africa and beyond.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made in discussing the limitations and prospects of African languages in ethics scholarship in African Studies. The paper defends pluriversalism as a plausible framework for negotiating and addressing the flaws in interior and exterior orientations in indigenous languages and African ethics. Though the challenges that may confront this pluriversalist position as well as the potential criticisms are yet explored in this paper, it is hoped that future research might further the discourse in this regard with ventilation of some prospects for future African Studies.

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Bios



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